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FIRST 5 CALIFORNIA INVESTS \$10 MILLION TO ADDRESS MOST PREVALENT CHRONIC DISEASE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

Rob Reiner Speaks to Dental Health Leaders About New Statewide Oral Health Initiative

LOS ANGELES – At the 2004 National Oral Health Conference today, Rob Reiner announced that First 5 California will invest \$10 million statewide to improve the oral health of children aged 0 to 5, marking it the biggest effort nationally of its kind.

The Early Childhood Oral Health Initiative will address critical state needs surrounding the oral health of California's children. Studies show that only 21 percent of 2-year-olds in California have ever seen a dentist and fewer than two-thirds of preschool-age children have ever been to a dentist. The American Academy of Pediatricians and pediatric dentists recommend that a child first visit the dentist by 12 months of age.

"It's a shame that the most prevalent disease of early childhood is also the most preventable," said Rob Reiner, chair of First 5 California. "This initiative will not only help inform parents about the importance of their child's oral health, it will help get kids the treatment they need."

The Oral Health Initiative is a joint effort between the First 5 California State Commission and local County Commissions and will focus on education, prevention and access to dental insurance. The initiative supports an Insurance-based Demonstration project and an Education and Training project that will be offered in local, regional and statewide settings as well as online. Programs are already being implemented in counties throughout the state.

Studies show that tooth decay is the most prevalent chronic disease of early childhood. It affects more than one out of seven preschoolers and over half of California's elementary school children. It is a major cause of missed school days.

"More than 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental-related illnesses," said Jane Henderson, executive director of First 5 California. "When children are absent from school they fall behind. This Initiative will help to achieve First 5's goal of ensuring that children enter school healthy and learning."

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 50 percent of tooth decay remains untreated in low-income children. Additionally, studies have linked poor oral health to decreased school performance, impaired speech development and poor social relationships. Studies show that children from low-income families are nearly 12 times more likely to miss school because of dental problems than children from higher incomes.

Services from the initiative will be strategically targeted toward oral health providers that serve communities with the state's most needy children – those that live in low income neighborhoods, rural communities and remote parts of the state where access to dentists is limited. In many areas, mobile dental vans will provide oral health screenings, parent-child education, and referrals and case management to high-risk children.

“With all of the challenges children face in school today, tooth decay shouldn't be one of them,” said NAME, TITLE from ORGANIZATION. “First 5's Oral Health Initiative will begin addressing these issues when our youngest kids need it most – before the problems develop.”

Cavities are the most easily preventable and most prevalent chronic disease of early childhood. There are simple steps that parents can take to improve their children's oral health. Here are some tips to keep your children's smiles healthy:

- Never put your child to bed with a bottle, as this may cause early childhood cavities (baby bottle tooth decay).
- Schedule the first dental visit by 12 months of age.
- Remember to wipe or brush your child's teeth daily, especially after eating. When your child is about 3 years old, help him or her to brush twice a day.
- Give your child water rather than juice when he or she is thirsty. After six months of age, one small serving of juice is enough each day.
- Ensure they eat a well balanced diet focusing on the five major food groups. Offer your child healthy snacks like fruits, vegetables and cheeses.
- Ask your child's dentist about whether or not you should consider having your child take fluoride pills.

About First 5 California

First 5 California (also known as the California Children and Families Commission) was established after voters passed Proposition 10 in November 1998, adding a 50 cents-per-pack tax on cigarettes to fund education, health, child care and other programs for expectant parents and children up to age 5. Prop. 10 was designed to address the lack of public funding and support for early childhood development in the wake of a growing body of scientific evidence indicating that

the emotional, physical, social and developmental environments to which children are exposed have a profound impact on their ability to reach their greatest potential in school and to become productive members of society.

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